Kremlin dismisses speculation of Putin-Lavrov tiff

MOSCOW: The Kremlin dismissed speculation on Friday that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had fallen out of favour with Vladimir Putin after efforts to organise a summit between the Russian president and Donald Trump were put on hold last month.

Lavrov, 75, a veteran Soviet-era diplomat known for his robust negotiating style, was absent from a big Kremlin meeting this week that he would typically attend, and Putin chose someone else to attend a G20 summit in South Africa later this month, a role that Lavrov has filled in the past.

For two weeks in a row, the Foreign Ministry has also not disclosed Lavrov's travel plans and speaking engagements for the following week.

The developments have fueled speculation that Lavrov, who has served as a foreign minister for more than two decades, may have fallen out of favour with Putin due to the collapse of plans for the summit in Budapest.

Asked on Friday if Lavrov was in trouble with Putin, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed the idea. "I will give you a brief answer: there is nothing true in these reports," Peskov said.

Asked to confirm that Lavrov would continue to work in his current role, Peskov added: "Absolutely. Lavrov is working as a foreign minister, of course." Lavrov spoke by phone to US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on October 20 to discuss the possible summit, days after it was announced by Trump following a phone call with Putin.

The next day, Trump said that he did not want to hold a meeting that would be "a waste of time". He later said he had cancelled the summit because it "just didn't feel right".

Trump has sought a rapprochement with Moscow and held a summit in Alaska with Putin in August.

But he has backed calls for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine with forces at their present positions, while Moscow has said it wants Kyiv to yield more territory.

Washington called off the new summit after Lavrov's ministry sent a message indicating Moscow was not prepared to yield on hardline demands over Ukraine.—Reuters

US accuses Iran of 'plotting to kill' Israeli ambassador

WASHINGTON: The United States accused Iran on Friday of "plotting to assassinate" Israel's ambassador to Mexico, in what would be the latest attempt to take the two countries' conflict to another region.

A US official said the Revolutionary Guards' elite Quds Force initiated the plot late last year and that it was disrupted this year.

"The plot was contained and does not pose a current threat," the US official said.

The US official did not provide detailed evidence or say how the plot was contained. The Iranian mission to the United Nations declined comment.

According to the US official, the alleged plot would have taken place after April 1 last year, when Israel attacked the Iranian embassy complex in Damascus, killing several top officers of the Revolutionary Guards.

Israel carried out a much more extensive bombing campaign in Iran this year that killed more than 1,000 people. The United States joined by bombing key nuclear sites. Iran has been a critical supporter of Hamas, which has ruled the Gaza Strip since winning an election in 2007.—AFP

SUPPORTERS of the Kurdistan Democratic Party gather in Erbil's Franso Hariri Stadium for a rally ahead of Iraq's parliamentary elections.—Reuters

US snubs UN meeting on its rights record

The only other country to have boycotted the periodic review was Israel in 2013

GENEVA: The United States became only the second country on Friday to ever boycott a United Nations review of its human rights record, triggering outrage against the Trump administration over mounting abuses.

Seats were left empty at the world body's European headquarters in Geneva for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which all 193 UN member states have to undergo every four to five years.

Some countries have requested postponements since the UPR began in 2008, but Israel was the only previous no-show in early 2013, although it eventually underwent a delayed review 10 months later.

As the review was set to begin, UN Human Rights Council president Jurg Lauber looked at the empty seats behind the US nameplate and said: "I note that the delegation of the United States is not present in the room."

The US absence was not a surprise after the Trump administration decided early this year to halt Washington's cooperation with the rights council, and announced in August it would also boycott the UPR process.

But it still angered a number of US officials and rights groups who had come to Geneva to list their growing concerns since Trump returned to power in January.

'Shocking'

"It's shocking that the US decided not to participate," Carolyn Nash of Amnesty International said, accusing Washington of "walking away from even the impression of caring about the safety and security of people in the US and around the world".

This is "really an abdication of US multilateral and human rights leadership," Uzra Zeya, head of Human Rights First, said.

Speaking at one of several events at the UN connected with the aborted US review, she warned the government had created an "unprecedented reprisal environment" with infringements on free speech, government "weaponisation of federal funds" and Trump's "massive deportation operation".

Others listed the crackdowns on universities, the media and art institutions, as well as lethal strikes on alleged drug boats in the Caribbean and Pacific, among alarming developments.

Larry Krasner, who was re-elected district attorney of Philadelphia earlier this week, said he was not surprised that Trump "wants to escape accountability".

But he voiced hope the "moral authority" of the people would help "rein in a rough president ... who wants to be Adolf Hitler".

The side events were taking place in a room of the UN's European headquarters where former US first lady Eleanor Roosevelt helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights before its adoption in 1948.

"It's tragic and deeply ironic that we helped to create the norms as well as this (UPR) process that we are now backing out of," a former senior US official said.

Need for 'sunlight'

Many urged the international community to speak out and support their work to hold the US government in check.

"It's the Human Rights Council, the United Nations system and a community of nations committed to human rights and democracy who can bring necessary sunlight to these abuses," said Chandra Bhatnagar, head of the American Civil Liberties Union's southern California branch.—AFP

Iraqis sceptical of political system ahead of elections

BAGHDAD: Iraqis will elect a new parliament on Tuesday (Nov 11), in a key test for Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani and for a system seen by the country's young population as merely enriching those already in power.

Many ordinary voters are disillusioned with Iraq's 20-year-old experiment with democracy, saying it has brought only corruption, unemployment and poor public services, while parties, politicians and armed groups divide the spoils of their country's vast oil wealth and distribute jobs to loyalists.

Iraq began voting for its politicians in 2005, after the 2003 US invasion which toppled Saddam Hussein.

Sectarianism has largely subsided, especially among younger Iraqis, but remains embedded in a political system that shares out government posts among Shias, Sunnis, Kurds, Christians and other ethnic and religious groups.

Roughly 40 per cent of the registered candidates are under 40, highlighting attempts by the new generation to challenge the political domination of older power networks. Sudani, who took office in 2022 and is seeking a second term, leads the Reconstruction and Development Coalition, which groups several Shia parties and is campaigning on improving services, fighting corruption and consolidating state authority.

He has been a rare strong prime minister who has pushed through reconstruction projects and fostered cordial ties with both Iran and the US, Iraq's main foreign allies.

The State of Law Coalition, led by former premier Nouri al Maliki, remains influential and competes with Sudani's camp for dominance. A collection of parties with ties to Iran and with their own armed groups are running on separate lists.

The main Sunni political force is former parliamentary speaker Mohammed al Halbousi's Taqaddum (Progress) Party. It draws support from Iraq's mainly Sunni west and north — Saddam's former heartlands.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of veteran leader Masoud Barzani dominates the semi-autonomous government of the northern Kurdistan Region. It seeks a greater share of the oil revenues that shore up the national budget.—Reuters

Three killed in US strike on alleged drug boat

WASHINGTON: US forces on Thursday struck another alleged drug trafficking boat in the Caribbean, killing three people, Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth said, bringing the death toll from Washington's controversial anti-narcotics campaign to at least 70.

The United States began carrying out such strikes — which experts say amount to extrajudicial killings even if they target known traffickers — in early September, aiming at vessels in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific.

The US strikes have destroyed at least 18 vessels so far — 17 boats and a semi-submersible — but Washington has yet to make public any concrete evidence that its targets were smuggling narcotics or posed a threat to the United States.

Hegseth released aerial footage on X of the latest strike, which he said took place in international waters like the previous strikes. The video showed a boat traveling through the water before exploding into flames.—AFP

US influencers falsely associate Mamdani with extremist group

Among the right-wing figures who linked a fake post to Mamdani was Laura Loomer, a Trump favourite

WASHINGTON: US right-wing influencers falsely linked New York's mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani to the militant Islamic State (IS) group, amplifying a fabricated statement that garnered millions of views on social media, researchers said on Thursday.

Mamdani, the first Muslim and South Asian elected to lead America's largest city, secured a decisive victory this week in the face of fierce attacks on his policy proposals and religious background.

A slew of anti-Mamdani accounts on the Elon Musk-owned platform *X* have circulated a statement purportedly from IS titled "Operation Manhattan Project", which alluded to an attack in New York City on election day (Nov 4) against "American aggression".

Among the influencers who linked the fake communique to Mamdani was Laura Loomer, a conservative influencer who has Trump's ear.

"Muslims can't think of a better way for the Muslims to celebrate the victory of a Muslim mayoral candidate today than by committing an ISIS attack in NYC," Loomer wrote in a post on *X* that racked up more than 200,000 views.

Other conservative accounts cited the purported statement to falsely claim that the extremist group had endorsed Mamdani as mayor.

The posts collectively amassed millions of views across the platform.

The purported letter, which displayed the logo of Amaq News Agency, pro-IS network, was fabricated, according to multiple researchers including the disinformation watchdog NewsGuard.

Meili Criezis, an American University academic, told the watchdog that the supposed communique did not bear the hallmarks of other statements that emanated from Amaq.

"Amaq is used [by the IS] to share news and claim responsibility for attacks," Criezis said.

"It doesn't make threats like what is stated in the screenshot."

The Information Epidemiology Lab, another research group, also said the circulated communique "sharply" diverged from established IS "media practices in language, style, formatting, and distribution".

The fabricated statement appeared to first surface on the far-right message board 4chan, a known haven for conspiracy theories.

In recent months, Mamdani, a long-standing supporter of the Palestinian cause, has vocally denounced antisemitism as well as the Islamophobia he himself suffered following the Sept 11, 2001, attacks.

The 34-year-old state lawmaker, who appealed to voters by pledging to tackle the soaring cost of living, has repeatedly been targeted by racist tropes and misinformation.

In the weeks leading up to the highly anticipated election, fact-checkers debunked several false internet claims targeting Mamdani, including that a non-citizen illegally voted for him and that one of his campaign staffers posed beside graffiti of Nazi swastika.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

WASHINGTON: Combo shows Mikie Sherrill (left), and Abigail Spanberger, Democrats who were elected governor of New Jersey and Virginia this week.—AFP

ROME: Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas at the Palazzo Chigi.—AFP

ESTEPONA: Juan Miguel Quinones, a Spanish self-taught sculptor and former construction labourer, poses among his marble ice-creams at an exhibition room of the Mirador del Carmen cultural centre,—AFP

FRANCE'S President Emmanuel Macron with Mexican counterpart Claudia Sheinbaum during a ceremony in Mexico City.—AFP

Mexico seeks return of historic manuscripts from France

PARIS: The return of two centuries-old manuscripts from France to Mexico dominated talks during French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to the Latin American country on Friday. But the request, as expected, met headwinds.

At the heart of the discussions are two manuscripts illustrating Indigenous Mexican life: the Codex Borbonicus, kept at the library of French National Assembly, and the Codex Azcatitlan, which is part of France's National Library collection.

"Our main interest is the return of these codices, which are very important to Mexico," said Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum last month.

Mexican manuscripts, generally referred to as codices by researchers. include both pictographic and alphabetical narrations of the history, rituals and beliefs of the people of present-day Mexico before and after the arrival of Spanish colonisers in the 16th century.

The Codex Borbonicus gets its name from the Palais Bourbon, the seat of the French parliament's lower house, where it has been preserved since the 19th century.

It represents the "divinatory and solar calendars" of the Mexica civilisation, a dominant Indigenous population in pre-Hispanic Mexico, according to the French culture ministry.

The Codex Azcatitlan narrates the history of the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan "from the migration from the mythical Aztlan to the fall of the Mexica empire at the hands of the Spanish and their Indigenous allies in 1521", according to the Memorica site, a platform to preserve and share the country's heritage. —AFP

BEDUGUL: Devotees take part in a religious procession at a temple on Indonesia's Bali island.—AFP

SHANGHAI: Odet Abadia Gomez (left) teaches students how to use Dzine, an AI image editing platform, at a course at Shanghai Vancouver Film School.—AFP